

THE CHANGING ROLE OF THE BLACK CHAPLAIN

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INDEX

	PAGE
INTRODUCTION	1
BLACK CHAPLAIN IN HISTORY	4
CONTEMPORARY STYLE OF BLACK CHAPLAIN	13
FUTURE RESPONSIBILITIES OF BLACK CHAPLAINS	20
BIBLIOGRAPHY	

INTRODUCTION

THE CHANGING ROLE OF THE BLACK CHAPLAIN

The purpose of this paper is to attempt to set forth the changing role of the black chaplain. The role change is reflected more in how the chaplain views his duties and responsibilities as opposed to actual change in physical functions. A clear, concise image of the black chaplain will not be presented but hopefully the information provided will awaken an understanding and appreciation of his position as minister and black chaplain. I will attempt to explore the role of the chaplain from a historical viewpoint by reviewing activities of past chaplains and culminate with information on today's black chaplains which has been obtained from a survey and from personal experiences.

My interest in the role of the black chaplain commenced the very first day of my initial assignment. As I attempted to sign in, I was told, "If you have not signed in you do not have to right now, the deputy commander wants to see you immediately." These were the words of "welcome" to my first assignment as a proud chaplain in the United States Army. It was by far more than this. It was also my introduction into the role of a Black Chaplain. On the way to the Deputy Post Commander's Office I am sure I lost ten pounds. Anxious about what I might encounter, my mind almost went blank. It occurred to me that he might not permit me to sign in. A more optimistic thought was that he wanted me to explain the new concepts of ministering to

young men serving in today's Army; of this I was confident I could handle, since I had just completed the Basic Course. My mind soon strayed from this because of the apparent "urgency" of the situation. Inevitably, negative thoughts concerning reassignment again filled my mind. When I reported to the office of the Deputy Post Commander, my anxious moments vanished. He immediately related information of the gravest nature concerning a threat to post security. He continued with a statement that I was the only person who could prevent a great mishap. He concluded with the necessity of my being reassigned from the troop chaplain position and assigned as special projects officer. In approximately fifteen (15) minutes I was denied the troop chaplain assignment with all its concomitant benefits and assigned the immense project of solving human relationship problems that have and still baffle specialist in the field of psychology, sociology, etc.

In general the initial experience introduced me to the attitudes of those in authority on utilization of black chaplains. A utilization which implied a new dimension for black chaplains which requires expertise without formal training in technical areas such as psychology, and related fields. The black chaplains of the past were requested to demonstrate this unusual quality of expertise and the numerous burdens that accompanied it.

In order to appreciate the unique and changing role of the Black Chaplains, a historical view of their roles is essential. Chaplain Henry H. Turner, the first black commissioned chaplain was confronted with the same type of human relations/racial problems the black chaplain is faced with today; and there are a few white chaplains in the same predicament summed up as "voices crying in the wilderness." However, the black chaplain has always been expected to be a human relations/black expert with primary duty of removing the symptoms of the problem without addressing the real problem. He was and is expected to possess all the answers and with too few resources, solve all the black problems. This forced position has produced many great black chaplains who have made outstanding contributions to the US Army as they minister to troops in the adverse environment of a segregated, discriminating Army. Later in this paper I will discuss this in more detail.

BLACK CHAPLAIN IN HISTORY

The Civil War produced the first commissioned Black Chaplain, Henry H. Turner. At that time each black regiment was required by law to have a chaplain assigned to it. The chaplain was also re-
quired to conduct a school for the black soldier in addition to his
regular chaplain responsibilities.¹

Chaplain Allen Allensworth, in addition to duties, the regimental chaplain of the Twenty-Fourth Infantry sponsored a literary and debating society which met once a week after duty hours in the school. This was an attempt to stimulate some intellectual interests in the men.² As a trained educator, Chaplain Allensworth saw the need for a graded curriculum in the post school and he was able to devise a workable study outline for both children and enlisted men. In March 1889 he wrote a booklet, "Outline of Course of Study, and the Rules Governing Post Schools of Bayard, N.M." This booklet detailed the graded levels of his program and reviewed the content of each
subject taught at every level.³

¹
A. L. Fowler, Master's Thesis, (Baton Rouge, La.: Southern University), p. 4.

²
Arlen L. Fowler, The Black Infantry In The West 1869-91, (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Publishing Corporation, 1971), p. 85.

³
Ibid., p. 105.

Chaplain Allensworth's achievements in education led to an invitation to deliver a paper on the topic, "Education in the United States Army," at the annual meeting of the National Education Association in 1891. His request for official permission to attend the meeting, to be held in Toronto, Canada, was denied by the War Department on the grounds that such orders were not authorized by regulations. Only by applying for a leave of absence and paying his own expenses was he able to attend.

The educational work of the chaplains in the black infantry regiments was a vital and significant contribution to the program of education in the army. The chaplains demonstrated that a post educational program when properly conducted under enthusiastic teachers and officers had a beneficial effect on the morale, discipline and esprit de corps of a garrison.¹

The chaplains of the black infantry contributed to the formulation of a program of army education that has today developed into a vital part of military thought and planning. The position of chaplains in the black regiments was unique in the Army. They were assigned directly to the units with the responsibility of conducting an education program.²

¹ Arlen L. Fowler, The Black Infantry In The West, 1869-91, (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Publishing Corporation, 1971), p. 106.

² Ibid., p. 107.

The black chaplain from the very beginning of his tenure in the army had to deal with the problems in which his men were involved. Usually, the problems existed more during the period when the paymaster visited the unit. This was followed by expeditions to the local saloons or houses of prostitution. At other times, fights and shootings were the consequences of money in the soldiers' pockets. Though he was not always rewarded with success, the chaplain on each post was concerned about these problems and attempted to reach the new recruits before the old solders did. In the 25th Infantry the chaplain spoke to the new men and emphasized the good record of the regiment and the importance of their maintaining it.¹

During this period, the injustice of unequal pay to black troops became cause for alarm in Chaplain Samuel Harrison. He presented the problem to the governor of Massachusetts. On June 15, 1864, legislation was finally passed granting equal pay to black soldiers.²

In this same war the Confederate Army had the first colored chaplain serving white troops. It happened merely by chance when a devout servant, "Uncle Lewis" was asked to conduct a religious service.³ The men were so pleased that they requested that he be their chaplain.

¹ Thomas D. Phillips, The Negro Regulars: An Examination of Some Aspects of the Army's Policy, 1866-97, Master's Thesis, (University of Wisconsin, 1966), p. 70.

² Ibid., p. 86.

³ Ibid., p. 95.

After the war, the chaplains became an integral part of the Freedman's Bureau as superintendents of education. These jobs were primarily administrative positions overseeing the educational progress of the Freedman.¹

The Spanish-American War had black troops wearing the uniform. My research reveals the name of Theophilis G. Steward who served with the 25th Infantry. Chaplain Steward, a Harvard graduate authored the book, 'The Colored Regulars in the U. S. Army.'² A soldier in the Regular Army had many activities and interest aside from his normal military duties. The chaplain was expected to be part of it. These³ included dances, parties, sports, education and music.

While the chaplain was in charge of education on the post, his main duty was to look after the spiritual welfare of the soldiers. The chaplain of a Negro regiment, usually a Negro himself, was a commissioned officer and like the white chaplain received \$1,000 a year, a free house and could retire at 64 with 3/4 pay. Whenever possible a Negro chaplain was assigned to a Negro regiment. This was not always the case but it was felt that the best arrangement was to have a Negro chaplain with a regiment. The chaplains' main duty was to conduct services, which usually included one on Sunday evening, sometimes one on Sunday morning and one on a week night.⁴

¹ Thomas D. Phillips, The Negro Regulars: An Examination of Some Aspects of the Army's Policy, 1866-97, Master's Thesis, (University of Wisconsin, 1966), p. 106.

² Ibid., p. 113.

³ Ibid., p. 116.

⁴ Ibid., p. 118.

In addition, he supervised the Sunday School, to which the officers sometimes sent their children and also arranged lectures for the men.

The chaplain was also in charge of other activities which were connected with his religious work. The 9th Cavalry Chaplain delivered a lecture to the men of each squadron on the cause and effects of venereal disease. Another chaplain set up an amusement tent which contained tables, games, a phonograph, letter writing paper and in some cases a motion picture machine for the men when they were out on maneuvers or in the field. Such recreation facilities were usually very popular with the men during their off-duty periods. This was about the only place they could go and in many instances the only form of entertainment.

During World War I, for the Negro soldier, the Negro chaplain was his direct course to God. It mattered not how ignorant a Negro soldier was or how difficult his life had been, he believed in God. There was something about his religion that was satisfying and genuine. No one could attend his service and hear him sing and pray without being touched. In writing to his family and friends he usually asked for their prayers. On one Sunday night at Camp Jackson several white soldiers came into one of the religious services at the colored "Y" and they joined heartily in the singing. After the meeting they told the secretary that they were leaving for France the next morning and had come to the meeting in order to get a little nearer to God.¹ The program of the "Y" offered the soldier an opportunity to be entertained

¹
Charles H. Williams, Sidelights On Negro Soldiers, (Boston: B. J. Bremner Company, 1923), p. 118.

in a wholesome environment. Sometimes the Negro secretary served not only the men in one camp but in several. Sometimes they would organize schools, offering prizes to encourage the men to learn to write. Some were not preachers but often they held on Sunday as many as seven services. All such services were of great value in building up the morale of the men and in relieving them of the depressing effects of the arduous work they were called upon to perform.

The work of the chaplain, who remained in the States, consisted of conducting religious services and educational work, visiting the sick in hospitals, aiding the soldiers in securing their allotments and allowances and often adjusting difficulties. Basically, the problems which the Negro chaplain had to deal with for the Negro soldier was surveyed by Mr. Williams. His survey included inquiry into the social and religious conditions and the state of mind of the colored troops. The complaints were: discrimination as to the issuance of passes, unfair treatment, oftentimes brutality on the part of the MP's, inadequate provision for recreation, ignorant white commander over Negro units, lack of opportunity for educated Negroes to rise above noncommissioned officers in the Reserved Labor Battalions, confinement to the guard house for long periods, and heavy penalties for minor infractions concerning rules of the camp, frequent lack of proper medical attention and treatment, consistent work at menial tasks, refusal of training in manual of arms, and denial of the opportunity to fire a gun, insufficient number of hostess houses, insufficient number of chaplains in

most camps, inadequate quarters, slow discharge of Negro men in labor battalions after the armistice and use of abusive language by white officers to black troops. At some camps, Negro men had practically no sanitary conveniences, bathing facilities, barracks, (usually tent camps) mess halls.¹

During this war in France there were fourteen organizations known as Pioneer Infantry Regiments which performed mainly stevedore work. These men had been given from one to three months of intensive military training in American camps and then sent overseas. Only a small number of Negro officers were there: dental officers, chaplains and band leaders.²

Black officers in the field were exposed to great humiliation. Hate and scorn were heaped on black officers, not by the enemy, but by some Americans. They were separated from fellow white officers which resulted in black officers eating on benches in mess as a means of maintaining segregation.

If such treatment was meted out to the black officers it is hardly surprising that black enlisted men were also the victims of discrimination. The most infamous example of this discrimination was contained in a scandalous order which originated in General Pershing's Headquarters

¹
Emmett J. Scott, Scott's Official History of the American Negro in the World War, (Chicago: Homewood Press, 1919), p. 118

²
Charles H. Williams, Sidelights on Negro Soldiers, (Boston: B. J. Bremmer Company, 1923), p. 63.

and was circulated to the French high command. The order was captioned: 'To the French Military Mission Stationed With the American Army-Secret Information Concerning the Black American Troops.' The document was the equivalent of an operation manual which offered guidelines to the French on how they should treat and respond to Black Troops in their homeland. Four separate points were made.

1. That the inferiority of the Black American to the White American was a fact of American life, a pattern which, though it may be regrettable was still a pattern.
2. That frequent vice was a rampant trait among black people and that it had to be corrected with stern measures since it could not be rooted out from their temperament.
3. That French Officers must avoid commending Black American Troops "too highly", particularly "in the presence of (white) Americans." That the French population must be officially discouraged from promoting any social relationships with black soldiers.¹

The Negro chaplain during World War II was one member of the mixed staff who had been traditionally welcomed as an officer leader of Negro troops. It was required by mobilization regulations that Negro units be assigned a Negro chaplain. To many commanders the presence of this person promised an assuaging answer to the more difficult problems of human-relations/leadership facing them. When officers and men became entangled in the many problems of a racial nature which could affect command in

¹
Otto Lindenmeyer, Black and Brave: The Black Soldier in America, (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1970), p. 85.

Negro units the first person to whom the problem was likely to be given was the chaplain. Based on the solid tradition of leadership in the Negro community life, chaplains were expected to possess special techniques of developing positive relationships between men and command. They were expected to provide aid in combating the internal stresses, redirecting energy, presently no alleviation or corrective action to change the situation which caused the problem.

Many commanders expected the Negro Chaplain to be a helpful link between the command and the troops, interpreting each to the other and smoothing the rougher stretches in the path of leadership. Until late in the war he was directed to explain to the Negro soldier the more difficult problems which arose.

To enlisted men, the chaplain's relation to leadership was a plain one. Where the chaplain was held in esteem and this esteem could arise from many approaches to the problems facing him, his influence for good was felt widely. Sometimes, chaplains became as enmeshed in unit quandaries as Negro Officers and men. Some chaplains felt that the Army measured a chaplain's success in terms of the degree to which he expedited Army discipline; but, the men judged him on his ability to unbend that discipline. The Negro Chaplain often found that, in the process of laying the groundwork for better discipline and morale, he had already alienated either his men or his superiors, with the result that he could effectively¹ influence neither.

¹
Ulysses Lee, *The Employment of Negro Troops*, (Washington, D. C.: Office of the Chief of Military History, United States Army, 1966), p. 227.

CONTEMPORARY STYLE OF BLACK CHAPLAIN

Questionnaires concerning the role of the black chaplain were forwarded to mostly active duty and some retired black chaplains. A few white chaplains participated in the survey.

Information obtained from the survey indicated that the role of the black chaplain is to serve all members of the command, dependents and authorized civilians. In addition to this task, he must handle racial problems and their causes. Our Chief of Chaplains commented at a panel discussion recently that the black chaplain is a part of the process in changing beliefs. To the Chief's comment I must add that white chaplains have the same obligation to change beliefs.

The black chaplain is in an unique position to help change the beliefs held so long by so many concerning the relationship between races. This is one of the main contributions the black chaplain can contribute to the advancement of humanity. Unfortunately all who wear the cross do not agree with our Chief. Some still see the messenger of God today as one who is to remain silent in face of injustice. The majority of black chaplains feel that they cannot afford for the good of the command and for the good of the country to remain silent. It is agreed that when they have spoken out with a conviction that they also had to pay the price for their cross. At times this was not reflected until the black chaplain received his OER. In many instances, black chaplains' OER is twenty points below the average of the white chaplains'. For this reason the black chaplain feels that he is only free to act or speak out if he has command

authority. It is understandable why some black chaplains do not speak out. After all when a man has many years invested in his job he does not wish to lose everything for which he has worked.

All doors are open to the black chaplain when the commander wants something out of him that only he can provide. One chaplain reports that he was offered favors for information concerning black troops. When this chaplain informed the commander that he was not going to be his "Uncle Tom," he began to feel that he could do no right. He recalled on one occasion when his office and waiting room was filled with waiting men to see him the commander came into his office and invited him outside to see a small piece of paper that was visible only from an above position. Other times you may find these same doors closed to you. Another chaplain reported that he was in conference with his Commanding General when his aide interrupted them and said that he had an emergency telephone call. The message was for the chaplain to return to his unit immediately because there was a race problem in the making. His answer was that it would take about twenty five minutes because he had walked over. The reply was I will send my jeep over to pick you up. Incidentally, this chaplain had been on foot for a couple of months unsuccessfully being able to secure transportation. Another chaplain reported that he was provided support only when he indicated that transportation was needed in order to avoid a racial flare up. When the black chaplain is denied this freedom, he becomes a voice that does not speak out for justice, an ear that does not hear the pain of injustice and the demands upon him are greater and an eye that does not see inequality. When the black

chaplain feels that he has the command behind him and with him he becomes an asset to his commander.

The black chaplain feels that he has a contribution to offer from his cultural and historical background. He does not mean merely when he is handling black men from other units who were sent to him by either white chaplains or white commanders. These men are usually sent to the black chaplain or requested by the black soldier because it is felt that he is better able to understand the man and his problem or merely because he is black. I agree with Dr. Katz of the Department of Psychology from Long Island University that the black man psychologically may be different due to the influence of the black community. The majority of black chaplains feel today that it is time to bury this reason. He is willing to help the white commander and white chaplain understand the black man. The black chaplain feels that he has enough to do if he assumes the responsibility of his unit.

The black chaplain feels that he cannot afford to be less than a super servant. He is not afraid to assume any task but he has found that he is not being given credit on his OERs for his work. But he also knows that when he is less than a super servant he is suspected of not doing his best and this is reflected on his OERs. Some whites feel that the black chaplain is being given too much credit. My research does not point this out. Many black chaplains report that they have had to resort to extreme measure which involved risking either life or limb. The following was reported by one black chaplain. The author requested not to be identified. "While assigned to a Conus Army Installation, I was

assigned to a troop unit. I received an 'emergency' call from the Post Chaplain for help. A situation had developed at the local stockade, and he wanted me to give the stockade chaplain some assistance. A group of black soldiers, reacting against stockade conditions which they considered, and were later admitted to be unjust, had taken over a wing of the facility. They were determined that it was worth risking death, extended sentences, and/or bad discharges to bring these conditions to the attention of the Commanding General.

Needless to say, the situation worsened. The confrontation reached riot stage, and bloodshed was imminent. I, though black, was still an officer and considered a part of the oppressing establishment, and therefore was not to be trusted. The situation was that two of the prisoners were to be moved out to Leavenworth. The group consensus was that their number would not be diminished by any means. The prisoners had a brain-storm. They decided that they would trade 'the Chaplain' (Me) for the two cellmates who were to be transferred. The Correctional Officer (White) turned and asked me, in front of the prisoners, if I would do it? I did. As the exchange was being made, the 'group' leader was heard to comment, 'let them go, if anything funny happens, we can kill the Chaplain.' Needless to say, the stockade administration was very careful. I did manage to build a lot of trust with the prisoners, even to the point that they were singing and praying with me. Even though I voluntarily accepted the risks, it was my color that was the basis for my involvement -- not necessarily my talents." This chaplain further stated that he received no special credit for his heroic ministry.

Another black chaplain reported that he built a chapel in RVN and on the day of dedication he was relieved of his job. Of course the unit did not give him the credit for this job. Instead, they tried to discredit him as a chaplain. But in each case their dedication has not weakened their spirit.

Bishop Henry C. Bunton of the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church recently served on a panel at a black chaplain's conference stated that, "the black chaplain is pulled in two directions. In one direction his ministry is to all, but yet he is reminded that he has a special ministry to the blacks. He is encouraged by the commander to spend additional time with the blacks in the dayroom, barracks or wherever he spends his free time. The blacks remind him that he is black and that he is expected to know their needs. He is expected to teach Black History and provide a Black Worship." Often the black chaplain may be viewed as a 'Uncle Tom' when he fails to live up to expectations of the troops which may vary from post to post. Once the black chaplain loses his credibility his effectiveness is destroyed. This for most black chaplains is a constant threat.

The position of the black chaplain is usually one of aloneness. He must be very careful for fear of being labeled as either 'Uncle Tom' or a 'Black Chaplain'. Although most black chaplains expressed that they are viewed as a black chaplain. In all cases this expression indicated his ability to minister to black needs and his ability to relate his rich heritage to all in bringing healing to souls. Most black chaplains desire to be viewed as a black chaplain. I am aware

that some white chaplains and some black chaplains view the black chaplain as a chaplain. In many situations the black chaplain is called upon to perform a task because he is black. This can be a very dangerous assumption. Many black chaplains have found themselves in situations which required specialized training. In most cases he has not had this training. For this reason the black chaplain feels that he needs additional training to deal with the problems which he is called upon to handle. One chaplain reported that he was given the task of going into a riot torn community in 1969 at Gainesville, Florida to bury a black soldier. White military personnel attempted to serve the family but because of the tension in the black community these men sensed a threat to their lives. This black chaplain was requested to go into this riot torn community to fulfill a mission. He was given an open thirty day TDY orders to perform this task. Because of the potential danger this chaplain was given the telephone number of the Florida National Guard to call if assistance was needed. We can cite many and many examples where black chaplains are called upon to perform tasks in which he should receive special training. We can conclude that when a black chaplain is called upon to perform a task because of his blackness he should also be specially trained to do the job.

The past and present performance of the black chaplain has not dictated the course of the black chaplain. The horizon is too broad. The events of history will shape the role of the black chaplain. As I continue to wrestle with this concern on my heart today I realize

that I am not alone. My analyses of the responses received affirm that black, white chaplains and commanders struggle with this problem too. One white chaplain friend responded after one week of thinking about my questions by verbally stating that he had such mixed feelings about it that he was unable to cooperate. He said that he had never thought about the role of the black chaplain. He then said I believe I have without realizing it. He hadn't given me any answers on paper. He instead had given me more than what he could have put on paper. His attitude and honesty expressed a genuine concern. In this, I could see a liberated white chaplain friend.

My research up to this point has looked at the black chaplain from an historical and contemporary viewpoint. We now turn our attention to the future.

FUTURE RESPONSIBILITIES OF BLACK CHAPLAINS

Duties of the chaplain and the commanders to all troops, irrespective of race is set forth in AR 165-20. However, a fitting supplement to this regulation, one that supersedes all regulations is the religious teachings of love for all God's children and ministry to institutions affecting them. The black chaplain must continue to express love by applying all his energies, plus any special, unique experience to the entire military community. Ministry falls short of the mark when black chaplains do not purport themselves as black chaplains. Black chaplains must continue to be "black chaplains" which is synonymous with the suffering servant concept.

On occasions, all chaplains are called upon to perform tasks that are against the churches' dictates and their moral conscience. Chaplains must challenge the requestor, proceed to do what is right and just and be among the righteous ushering in a new day. Our true worth as chaplains, is not reflected in OER's, awards and decorations, but in truth - which will always prevail. So, today, the black chaplain must not be utilized as a CID agent, informer on blacks or dissidents, uncle toms or racists. Today, the chaplain must inform the command that the role of racial fireman should not be ours nor the role of the only qualified member of his staff to sit on every Human Relations Council. Today, white and black chaplains feel that this stereotype role has been played long enough. The time has come for mature professional chaplains to deal with PEOPLE PROBLEMS. Logically, the job cannot be done unless it is shared for there is only one solution to the problem, involvement. Through involvement in the situation, the white chaplain can examine his own prejudices and become liberated and live up to his calling. With the upsurge of minority

religions, Muslims, Ba Hai, Hindu, and DA requiring that the command be responsible to provide a ministry to all the troops, now it is time for the black chaplain and white alike to accept this challenge as part of their total ministry. The love of God and the ideals of our constitution which purports democracy can only be expressed through love of all men under our care.

To reach this goal as quickly as possible the black chaplain feel that there is an urgent need for the Chief of Chaplains' Office to conduct a quarterly conference with a cross representation from the grass roots. The black chaplains feel that this conference would be an opportunity for an open and factual dialogue with the one who is in position to immediately influence the structure of the United States Army.

The young man today is looking towards the chaplain for the example of the love of God - not merely being spoken, but in the reality of everyday experiences. It is felt that the chaplaincy can and must constructively influence the military structure. The direct result of this influence must be a viable organization conscious of and attempting to live up to tenets of Judeo-Christian religions.

We must be conscious of our methods of success. Too often we believed that God is on our side as a result of our victories. But if we look closely at our methods we cannot admit that God was on our side but that force rather than right prevailed. The talent which chaplains as a whole possess is sufficient to initiate change in the hostile attitudes which presently exist in the military, and create a family of concern. Given chaplain talent coupled with command authority, the obstacles of racism/human relations problems can be eliminated. Command support is not

always available. To illustrate this point, the following story is related. At a monthly training meeting, the 8th Army Chaplain was encouraging his chaplains to be more than mere tools for the commander. One chaplain who had accepted the suggestion thought to ask, if the head chaplain would support him in his effort. He received no answer. Needless to say there was a loss of confidence in the supervisors and head of the chaplain office. We all need to know that command support exist throughout the structure up to and including the Office of the Chief of Chaplains and also from the churches.

It is my personal belief that God wills for me to be a black chaplain ambassador advocator for him in a broken community. Today this need is not only felt in the military but in the civilian community as well. As we mend broken hearts we help to mend broken families who can mend broken communities, who can mend a broken society. Our role as black chaplain is merely an extension of the role of the Son of God.



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